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ABSTRACT

A significant problem of higher education today is public skepticism. If the educational leadership will stimulate political leaders to cope constructively with six central problems, the remaining years of the 1970's could be an "age of wisdom." The problems are: (1) the need for the assurance of greater resources in coming years; (2) the need for assistance to private institutions so that they may maintain or increase their share of total enrollment; (3) that the institutions themselves must prove they are capable of effective management of their considerable resources; (4) that higher education can no longer justify its existence with claims of the greater social mobility of college graduates; (5) that career-long education can no longer be sold simply as leisure-time activity; and (6) the oppressive regulation of individual institutions. Much higher education decision-making is left-handed. The campaign ahead must be waged to reclaim public confidence and gain understanding and respect among federal and state officials. (Author/MSE)

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Topical Paper No. 4

PUBLIC POLICY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

John J. Corson

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PUBLIC POLICY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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PUBLIC POLICY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

In the words of Charles Dickens, the remaining years of the 1970s may well be the "worst of times" and an "age of foolishness" for higher education in this country. If, however, the educational leadership will stimulate political leaders to cope constructively with six central problems, these years could be, again in Dickens' words, "an age of wisdom" and "the best of times." My purpose in this paper is to identify those problems, to suggest the kinds of public policy required, to picture the ways in which public policy is brought into being, and to question the ability of the higher education community to obtain the public policies that are urgently needed.

The Loss of Priority

First, let us be clear as to why the remaining years of the 1970s may be for higher education the worst of times. Not because our colleges and universities are confronted with the prospect of the leveling off of enrollments, of rising costs, and of straitened revenues. Worse, far worse, than these depressing elements is the fact that as Alan Pifer contends, in the 1975 annual report of the Carnegie Corporation, our colleges and universities are "the object of widespread skepticism".... "Doubts are being voiced," he indicates, "as to whether the education (these institutions) offer is worth its costs in years and dollars."

David Henry in his recent volume, Challenges Past and Challenges Present (Henry, 1975, Chapter 8), seconds Pifer's pessimistic diagnosis.

In a chapter which he aptly entitles, "Priority Lost," he reminds us that this country's colleges and universities experienced, during the decade 1958-1968, unprecedented enrollment growth, a broad expansion of programs, an increase in functions, generous financial support, and a high level of public confidence. Eight years later, he concludes, the future looks bleak indeed. Our colleges and universities are faced with the necessity of learning how to live with a relatively stable demand for their services. In coping with that prospect, they must recognize that in the minds of federal officials, state officials, employers, civic leaders, and parents, higher education has lost the preferred status it had formerly enjoyed. As this questioning of the worth of higher education gathers force, Fred Hechinger has written, "The colleges will lose their capacity to infuse new blood into the nation's power structure" and, he adds, "to elevate young people above their parents' station." (Hechinger, p. 11)*

What has happened? Value premises that have long been imbedded in the minds of citizens, and in federal and state laws and regulations, are being questioned with increasing frequency. The burden of proof that higher education is worth what it costs now and what it will cost has been shifted. Legislators, who are expected to vote appropriations; students, and their parents, who must ante-up tuition payments, are expecting the spokesmen for colleges and universities to prove again, if it can be proved, that higher education will give the graduate both a social and an economic

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*Hechinger quotes the chancellor of one of the major state university systems as having said, "A certain callousness has taken over. Unless we're really bleeding the politicians don't even look up from their desks."

advantage over his peers who lack a college education. And legislators, governors, and federal officials have to be shown, after the campus difficulties of the late 1960s, that the institutions are capable of managing their own affairs.

This is what Dave Henry meant when he wrote that "There can be little doubt that the priority of the '60s, built upon wide public concern, confidence and faith in the system has been lost. Budgets tell the story as do critics, commentators, polls, politicians, and the record of inadequate financial support" (Henry, 1975, p. 146).

Processes of Reestablishment

Can higher education regain the place in the pecking order from which it once looked down? If it is to resolve the six pressing problems that I will identify for you, it must. If it is to marshal the support required to influence public policy decisions in the years ahead, it must. For the role higher education will be permitted to play in the future, the range and number of students it may serve, the curricula it may offer, the individuals it may employ, the freedoms institutions will enjoy will all be determined, in substantial measure, for private institutions as well as public, by public policies that are established by federal and state governments.

If public policy making is viewed as a process, extending from the conception of an idea to the birth of a policy, one can recognize the elements of this political process. But because that word "political" conjures up unpleasant connotations in the minds of many people let us

be clear as to what is meant: a political process is nothing more than a process by which society determines what it perceives to be its common problems and problems that shall be dealt with by the instrument of the whole society, government. Stated in such terms, it doesn't sound like "dirty business" with which individuals, if they have anything to do with it, will dirty their fingers.

The process is a continual one. It goes on day in and day out in fair weather and foul. The ideas that become the raw material which the process develops and converts into its finished product--a public policy--may and likely will originate in the mind of one of the idea men of the time: a Ralph Tyler, a John Gardner, an Alice Rivlin, a Clark Kerr, a Dave Riesman, an Allan Cartter, or a Sandy Astin. The idea must then gain the approval and acceptance of some leaders in the educational field: the Father Hesburghs, Kingman Brewsters, Alex Heards, Bill Fridays, Harold Enarsons, or Ernest Boyers. With this acceptance it must next attract the support of the complex of educational trade associations that surround DuPont Circle in Washington: The American Council on Education, the AAU, the Association of American Colleges, the associations representing state universities and land grant colleges, the comprehensive state universities, and the junior and community colleges, and sometimes the AAUP.

The idea, if it tops these hurdles, will be proposed or brokered to the relevant leaders in the executive branch of the federal (or in other instances the state governments) where it meets the tests of political feasibility and available resources. If it is accepted by or forced upon the executive branch (perhaps even despite rejection by the executive branch), it will be proposed or brokered to the legislative leaders.

One step in the process may be taken either before or after the presentation of the idea to legislative leaders. That step is consideration of the idea by an advisory committee. A look back at the evolution of public policy relative to higher education will reveal the impact of such advisory groups. I refer to President Truman's Commission on Higher Education (1947-48), the Association of American Universities' Commission on Financing Higher Education (1952), President Eisenhower's Commission on Education Beyond the High School (1957-58), President Johnson's White House Conference on Higher Education (1964-65), the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare's Advisory Council on Higher Education which produced in 1972-73 the Newman Reports. The Education Commission of the States, another kind of body, has served for a decade as a forum in which governors and state educational officials have hammered out proposals for higher education.

An idea, if it survives these several steps in the public policy making process, is now in the laps of the legislative leaders; in the federal government: the Claiborne Pells, John Brademas, James O'Hara and Edith Greens, and their successors. But ideas are fragile. Many do not survive the legislative process, if they reach that stage in the process. Some are distorted or rejected as they are buffeted, perhaps for several years, by substantive and appropriations committees. Other ideas are refined and improved by the rigor of the process through which they move to adoption as a public policy in the form of a prevailing practice, a regulation, or a statute.

Let us look now at the problems confronting higher education in 1976 and the status of ideas for the solution of each in the functioning of this process.

Resources Needed

The first and foremost problem faced by our colleges and universities is the need for additional resources, the need for the assurance of greater resources in successive years ahead.

Assuming that our federal government can constrain the rate of inflation to no more than five percent per annum (and the prospect for that level of national self-discipline is not good) a total of from $20 to $25 billions of additional money per annum must be found to support our colleges and universities. Whether it will be found will determine the health and vitality of these institutions. From what source or sources it will come will determine whether many who are able to benefit and desire to continue beyond the high school shall have access to these institutions. In what form that additional money is made available, increased tuition payments, student aid, institutional grants, research grants, subsidized loans for construction of facilities or otherwise, will greatly and differentially affect the health of the several classes of institutions.

The ideas from which the public policy that will prevail for the remainder of the '70s and beyond exist in a variety of existing programs (the BEOG program, the College Work-Study program, and the student-loan program) and in proposals such as that for "cost of education supplements." The idea that support should be provided for the institution itself has not fared well at the federal level.

University trustees and presidents faced with the stark reality of the slowed pace of growth, the increased rate of inflation (Hughes, p. 67), and the lessened public confidence in higher education face a dilemma. Should they proceed on a full speed ahead basis, contending that their institutions must grow, pleasing their faculties, and likely antagonizing legislators; or should they batten down the hatches, tighten their belts, and face the risk of losing the confidence of their faculties while currying the favor of legislators and governors?

Private Institutions

The second problem demanding the reshaping of federal and state policies is the plight of private colleges and universities. The Carnegie Council has voiced the view that it is imperative for measures to be taken to assist private higher education to maintain, or perhaps even increase its share of total enrollment.

I am not one of these who nostalgically seeks to preserve the small private college as the provider of an especially needed type of higher education. Granting the arguments for pluralism, I would recommend that a goodly proportion of these private institutions deserve to, and likely will, die during the balance of this century. Again in the words of Dickens, "She's the sort of woman," said Martin Chuzzlewit, "one would almost feel disposed to bury for nothing; and do it neatly too."

Equally I believe that it is national foolishness to allow those private institutions providing a level of education that qualifies them to survive (and this would include two-thirds of existing private institutions) to waste away. Hence, I earnestly hope first that the present

effort of the American Council on Education to gain added appropriations for the concept of tuition equalization grants shall succeed, and I commend to you the Carnegie Council proposal that federal matching funds should be provided for one-half the cost of state tuition equalization grants. These grants would provide an average tuition grant of about $750 for all undergraduate students attending private colleges or universities.

Secondly, I hope that the states will be persuaded to provide increased aid for private-sector institutions. Note, please, that state governments have increased the aid provided private institutions fivefold during the last decade.

Efficiency of Operations

Both public and private institutions, if they are to weather the financial, enrollment, and confidence storms ahead, must demonstrate the capacity to manage their own affairs or have measures designed to improve the efficiency of institutional management forced upon them. Here it is not new public policy that is needed: it is proof that the institutions are capable of effective management of the large resources they are provided. They must prove their ability to use appropriated funds economically, to conceive and implement imaginative and timely educational programs, to abandon obsolete courses and programs, to demonstrate the talents and industry of faculty members, and to exhibit managerial practices that assure effective application of tax dollars.

The demonstration is essential to combat general impressions that have their roots in the chaos of the '60s, in the sprawling growth of many public

institutions, and a general lack of understanding among legislators and taxpayers as to how professors spend their time and how academic institutions function.

Unfortunately, as I see it, the effort being made to improve, and to demonstrate the improvement of managerial processes in academic institutions too often amounts to nothing more than the claim that the institution has adopted the latest managerial fad: PPBS, MIS, or MBO. More central to the improved functioning of the institution than any of these patent medicines of academic management might be reexamination of programs, the rigorous appraisal of courses, and the development of regular training conferences for departmental chairmen. However improved management is achieved the regaining of public confidence demands that it be achieved, and demonstrated.

The Nature of Education

Perhaps the most difficult two problems to be coped with both require the reeducation of the American people as to what higher education is all about. The public policy required to resolve these problems may be reflected indirectly in laws and regulations but must, more importantly, be imbedded in the minds of taxpayers generally. It will be difficult to gain general acceptance for the idea that the value of higher education lies largely in the intellectual stimulation, the cultivation of curiosity, and the personal growth of the individual. No longer can higher education rest its claim to support principally on the grounds that college attendees and particularly graduates will learn more and have access to greater social status than nonattendees.

It will be essential to justify the growth of career-long education on these bases of personal growth, rather than on the desirability of adult education as a leisure-time activity as entertaining as TV, and more contributory to attaining a better job and salary than equal time spent in jogging or at tennis. If career-long education is to be sold its spokesmen may better look to the current advertising slogan of Time magazine: "Time makes everything more interesting, including you."

Oppressive Regulation

The final problem that demands early resolution, and through the amendment of public policies, is the oppressive regulation of individual institutions. Regulation by the federal government to achieve equal opportunity for minorities, to ensure safety and health for employees, to ensure the confidentiality of student records, and by state governments to conserve financial resources is essential. The problem is how to ensure innovative operations in conformity with societal objectives while allowing much freedom of action by both faculties and administrators in the individual institutions.

The federal government's enforcement of affirmative action significantly limits the faculty's opportunity to choose its own members, and its establishment of the 1202 commissions tends to magnify the power placed in the hands of centralized state authorities: a governing board, or a state coordinating council. The critical question, if public policy has for its objective (and that supposition may be challenged) the strengthening and liberating of each institution, is: How much control is needed to achieve

coordinated effort and how little is desirable if the initiative of faculty members and of students is to be cultivated rather than suppressed? A relevant Chinese proverb holds that: "One should govern people as one would cook a small fish--gently. Too much cooking, too much interference with the natural processes make it fall to pieces, or destroys its flavor."

One can paraphrase this proverb to fit the current relations between institutions of higher education and both federal and state governments with little difficulty. If institutions are increasingly made to conform, and particularly if their programs and courses must conform with the dictates of some centralized agency, the result will be in the words of Adam Yarmolinski: "The teachers begin as drillmasters and are likely to end as custodians, while the students begin as rote learners and are likely to end as inmates" (Yarmolinski, 1962, p. 18).

Left-Handed Decision Making

Much public policy making for higher education in this country can be characterized as left-handed decision making. Homer Babbidge and Robert M. Rosenzweig pointed this fact out when they wrote, fourteen years ago, that the federal government has not created policies and provided support to build and strengthen higher education as a function of government. Rather the federal government, somewhat in contrast to the state governments, has used higher education to aid in solving national problems and to aid with "situations involving emergencies, crises, or extraordinary needs" (Yarmolinski, 1976, p. 24).

The truth of this statement can be illustrated by happenings in each of the last four decades. During the 1930s, the federal government

provided support to keep young people in schools and off the relief roles through the National Youth Administration and sponsored research through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to provide work for unemployed teachers.

During the World War II period, our colleges and universities were used to provide, under contract with the federal government, a variety of military instruction programs and to undertake much research vital to our war effort. After the war, the colleges and universities were used to provide educational opportunity for a horde of veterans, many of whom would never have attended were it not as the reward for their military service. Since then, our colleges and universities have educated an increasing number of individuals supported by their government as veterans and more recently as social security beneficiaries.

After Sputnik flew overhead in 1957, the federal government turned to the colleges and universities to supply the knowledge and the manpower required to combat a new threat to the country's national security.

Lyndon Johnson summarized this left-handed view of the role of colleges and universities when, in 1968, in a message to Congress, he said:

> The prosperity and well being of the United States--and thus our national interest--are vitally affected by America's colleges and universities, junior colleges and technical institutes....
> Increasingly, we look to the colleges and universities--to their faculties, laboratories, research institutes, and study centers--for help with every problem in our society and with the efforts we are making toward peace in the world....

President Johnson did not say that our colleges and universities required support as institutions in their own right, performing a service as essential as, let us say, the postal service. He asked for their support as a means of serving other ends.

The Way Ahead

It has been said that he who thinketh by the inch and talketh by the yard should be kicketh by the foot. Hence let me hurry to picture what I see ahead.

Perhaps what I see ahead can best be depicted by Churchill's words, "Blood, sweat and tears." To be more specific, that means, as I see it, that higher education has a tough, a very tough road ahead. If it is to gain adoption of the public policies needed to cope with each of the foregoing problems, it must find the leaders who can and will mount an unprecedented political campaign, and it must wage a campaign during the years immediately ahead:

1. A campaign that will reclaim public confidence; that will persuade employees, parents, students and others that higher education is essential for a technological, democratic society as well as good for the individual who would forge ahead in such a society; and
2. A campaign that will gain the understanding and respect among federal officials and members of Congress that will be required to update federal policies, and will replace the skepticism and negativism now manifested by many state legislators and elected officials in the capabilities and industry of faculty members, and in the leadership of college and university administrators.

The higher education community does not now have within its fold the leaders needed, and it is not good at waging such campaigns. One bit of proof of this latter contention is found in the results of a recent Ladd

and Lipset poll of the opinion of academics. The community is seen in that poll by academics "as having less influence over the direction of public life than virtually any other" contending group (Chronicle, p. 7).

The higher education community, on the other hand, has the advantage of repeated demonstrations over recent decades that it can aid in resolving this nation's manpower technological, health care, and other problems. But it is not good in the political public policy making process because it has been privileged to believe, over the decades that the worth, even the essentiality, of the services it offers is obvious and that it has no need or obligation to demonstrate its utility. This belief has led some spokesmen for higher education to exude a sense of intellectual superiority that gained no votes.

It is not good at this task because the educational community is pluralistic in structure and has spoken to the public, and more importantly to the legislators, with many and often competing tongues.

It is not good at this task because many in the higher education community have been allergic to the politician, and uncomfortable in the political arena where increasingly educational policies have been shaped. Their performance in the political arena has led one long-time observer of the Congress to write, "It is hard to believe that such smart people could be such dumb lobbyists " (Sawislak, p. 55).

But if the higher education community is to gain the public support required to cope with the problems I have identified and to enjoy a buoyant, growing future in a period of no growth, it must face up to its weaknesses in the policy making process and seek out those leaders who can talk the political lingo and deal effectively with those who are shaping its future.

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